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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
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SUBJECT: CARTOON CONTROVERSY: MOROCCANS ANGRY BUT REACTING  
WITH RESTRAINT SO FAR

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In response to the Danish cartoon controversy, reaction in Morocco has been uniform -- amongst the Moroccan government, the Supreme Council of Ulemas, the political parties, demonstrators, and shopkeepers -- in condemning the drawings and their affront to the Prophet. A February 3 demonstration organized by two Islamist groups drew as many as several thousand Moroccans to protest peacefully in front of Parliament in Rabat. Some shopkeepers have taken it upon themselves to highlight Danish products in their store and ask consumers to boycott these goods (even while the goods remain on shelves). SMS messages and an internet petition have also been urging a boycott of Danish products. Friday sermons roundly condemned the drawings, but called for a "civilized reaction" from citizens. The edition of France Soir which reproduced the drawings was banned in Morocco while the director and editor of a local Arabic daily which printed the pictures were called in for questioning by the police. While there is no official Danish presence in Morocco, there are rumors that students have applied to have a "sit-in" in front of the Casablanca home of the honorary Danish consul, a Moroccan businessman, and the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) website has posted an announcement calling for all Moroccans to join in this February 7 protest. End summary.

GOM and Ulema Council Condemn Cartoons

¶2. (SBU) Minister of Communications and GOM spokesman Nabil Benabdullah issued the official Moroccan government reaction to the cartoons following a February 2 meeting of the Council of Government, noting that the drawings "harm the Prophet and constitute an act of provocation which offends the sentiments of Muslims." Benabdullah explained that the cartoons, "in the name of freedom, attempt to offend the belief of the Islamic nation."

¶3. (SBU) Morocco's Supreme Council of Ulemas, a group chaired by King Mohammed VI which includes fifteen religious scholars, the heads of the thirty regional councils and the Minister of Islamic Affairs, issued a strong condemnation of the cartoons. The Ulemas' January 31 statement emphasized regret that the cartoons "aimed at offending and hurting Muslims." The council also stressed the legitimacy of Morocco's reaction to the publication of the cartoons, including the banning of the edition of French daily France Soir which reproduced the drawings, and urged international decision-makers to unite to protect freedom and ethical values threatened by hatred. According to official news agency Maghreb Arab Presse (MAP), the Ulemas also hailed the Vatican's public declaration, stressing that "it is

unacceptable to hurt one another, especially when it comes to sacred symbols of other faiths." In a statement calling for moderation, the council explained that there is "no room for abuses and conflicts among believers of different religions," and that the "right to freedom of speech does not include the right to harm the religious feelings of believers, regardless of their religion." The communiqu  emphasized that the reaction in Morocco to the drawings indicated no signs of the existence of a problem between Christianity and Islam.

#### Peaceful Demonstration Draws Hundreds

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14. (SBU) In a peaceful demonstration in front of parliament on February 3, hundreds of Moroccans -- estimates were as high as 3000 -- protested the publication of the Danish cartoons. The protest was organized primarily by the Islamist Reform and Unification movement and the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO). Abdelwahid Mutawakil, head of the JCO's Political Circle, and Fatallah Arsalane, JCO official spokesperson, were prominent participants, along with political party members from Istiqlal, the USFP and the Party for Justice and Development (PJD). Saad Eddin Othmani, PJD Secretary General, told MAP that the purpose of the sit-in

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was to "send a clear message to the international community that Muslims won't tolerate any mockery or harm against Prophet Mohammed." Othmani called on the international community to adopt a charter providing for the respect of all religions. Istiqlal Executive committee member Mohammed Al-Khalifa described the sit-in as a "strong and bonafide condemnation from all Moroccans of any kind of insult against the Prophet and Islam." The demonstration was authorized by the GOM, and no security incidents were reported. There was no anti-American sentiment expressed among the demonstrators.

15. (SBU) Despite the fact that Arabic daily (and

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PJD-affiliated) Al-Tajdid reported that up to three thousand people participated in the event, several eyewitness reports put the number of protesters closer to several hundred. Slogans chanted during the protest focused primarily on support for the Prophet. Many demonstrators carried the Koran and had handwritten slogans on small boards calling for "Yes for press freedom, but no for freedom to insult the Prophet," and "Against the European crusaders fighting Islam." Other demonstrators carried the full-page advertisement from a recent edition of Al-Tajdid expressing support for the Prophet. The PJD website has called for another demonstration to take place in front of the home of the Danish honorary consul (a Moroccan citizen) in Casablanca the evening of February 7.

#### Impact on the Press

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16. (SBU) According to a Ministry of Communications statement, Morocco banned the edition of France Soir which reproduced the cartoons. The communiqu  stressed that while Morocco respects freedom of opinion, it should not be used as a "false pretext" for "gratuitous provocation." The statement added that the GOM would not allow the distribution of any publication "offending the feelings of a community of one and a half billion believers." Meanwhile, the editor and director of Arabic daily An-nahar Al-Maghrebiya were summoned by the police for republishing one of the cartoons despite the fact that the article published with the drawing denounced them. They have not yet been charged with any crime.

#### Giving Consumers the Choice

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17. (SBU) In smaller Moroccan groceries, some shopkeepers have put up signs indicating which products are Danish and asking Moroccans to boycott these products. Larger grocery stores have not yet taken any Danish products off the shelf. Several Moroccans have received SMS phone messages asking to "make the Danish pay for their audacity to mock our prophet,"

and calling for the boycott of such products as Nido powdered milk, Puk butter, and Kinder chocolate. An internet petition circulating within Morocco has registered a total of 4493 signatures protesting the cartoons and "defending the Prophet."

#### Friday Sermons Call for "Civilized" Response

18. (SBU) Throughout Morocco, the February 3 (Friday) sermons, including the prayer King Mohammed VI attended in northern Morocco, widely denounced the cartoons and called for people to show support to the Prophet in a "civilized" way. While the sermon's message conveyed support for freedom of expression, it stressed that respect must be shown to religion, and especially to the three monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

#### Comment:

19. (SBU) Overall, Moroccan reaction has been fairly restrained, compared to events elsewhere in the region, although media headlines continue to focus on the issue and the controversy is discussed regularly on some television talk shows. Demonstrations will likely continue, but we do not anticipate violence, nor have the Moroccan police so far suggested undue concern with the level of popular sentiment. As the Danes are not officially represented here, it is more difficult for the Moroccans to find a specific target to air their grievances beyond a boycott of consumer products. So far they are not turning their wrath on the EU or specific European countries. The Danish Ambassador to Morocco, resident in Lisbon, however, plans to visit Morocco next week and may have additional comments on the Moroccan reaction when he calls at the US Embassy. End comment.

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